

## "I'm From the Government and I'm Here to Help You" Visiting NHLs

**F**or one week during each summer for the past 10 years, I have traveled around Iowa visiting many of the 23 NHLs located in the state and speaking with as many of the landmark owners or managers as possible. The process usually involves hours of planning and dozens of telephone calls, hurried meals, and long hours while traveling, and occasional quick juggling of the planned itinerary. But the results are well worth the effort. The main benefit of landmark visits is the opportunity to talk with the owners or managers about the NHL program and to directly learn about problems or conditions that concern them.

Iowa contains a wide variety of NHL property types. Most are publicly-owned buildings, structures, vessels, or archeological sites, but there are also two privately-owned houses, a privately-owned vessel, and a privately-owned archeological site. Five are vessels and several have multiple owners or are managed by an organization that does not own the property. When I first started the visits, I encountered some owners who knew virtually nothing about the NHL program. Almost every year, I meet new owners or newly appointed managers. They may not be aware that their property is an NHL and often have many questions. Their questions usually are easily answered and I carry a supply of "The National Historic Landmarks Program: Common Questions and Answers" and other literature to leave with them.

Landmark owners or managers with whom I have met have without exception been very cooperative and interested in showing their property. They take pride in its unique features and all seemed to enjoy talking about the NHL. Occasionally, they will ask for technical advice for a situation that is of concern to them. One of the

most common questions that owners ask concerns the availability of funding for repairs or maintenance of the property.

Although money is not available directly through the NHL program, I have been able to give several NHL owners information about a cost share program for historical properties administered by the State Historical Society of Iowa. Some NHLs have already received funding through the Historical Resource Development Program



*The George M. Verity NHL at the Keokuk River Museum, Keokuk, Iowa, during the floods of 1993. Photo ©1993 Allen Hess.*

(HRDP) and others have requested applications. In addition to state grants, one NHL has received funding through the Challenge Cost Share Program (CCSP) administered by the National Park Service.

Periodic meetings with NHL owners help establish communications with them. In addition to site visits, I telephone each owner once or twice through the year to ask if he or she has any questions about the NHL program or knows about any threats to their individual property. In this way, NHL owners have alerted me to potential threats on several occasions. It is certainly easier to understand a situation that an owner or manager describes after having seen the property.

The visits have other benefits as well. They help provide a quick response when there is an

*Van Allen Store  
NHL, Clinton, Iowa.  
Detail. The store  
was designed by  
architect Louis  
Sullivan. Photo by  
the author.*



unusual situation, such as the 1993 flooding in the Midwest. During that tense summer, I telephoned all the NHL owners in Iowa whose properties might have been damaged. Because I had established prior contact with them, I was able to quickly gather information about the extent of the damage. One of the NHL owners needed advice about treatment of waterlogged maps and photographs. The NPS was able to provide it and also able to give the site manager information about emergency financial assistance for dealing with the damage.

The typical trip usually takes me approximately 1,300 miles and I am able to visit between 14 and 16 NHLs.

Few NHLs are located in northeast Iowa, and there are great distances between some in the southern and western parts of the state. NHLs are located in the very southeast and northwest corners of the state and near the southwest corner. I make an effort to visit the landmarks that have been listed as threatened and those located farther than an easy drive from my home park.

Each trip is something of an adventure. Most of the NHLs in Iowa are easily reached, but two that I regularly visit are accessible only by crossing farm fields that can be difficult to negotiate in wet weather. Under the best conditions, one particular property is most easily reached by fording a small stream which is usually about mid-calf to knee deep. During the floods of 1993, however, I was advised to take a different route down a fairly steep, wooded hill to reach the site.

During these trips, I find it important to make notes

that will help when preparing my comments for annual NHL status updates. Following a trip, another important part of the visit involves responding to the questions and concerns expressed by the owners. A prompt response reinforces good communications with the NHL owner. As a result of the visits, I believe that NHL owners are also more likely to contact me when they have questions. NHL owners, themselves, are sometimes approached by people with questions about specific NHLs or who would like information about the

program to determine if their property would be eligible. NHL owners are able to refer them to me.

There are several benefits to visiting NHLs which I view as an important part of the NPS's mission. In addition to providing the NHL owner with information about the NHL program and opportunities for assistance, there are intangible benefits of improving communications and displaying the importance of the program. Personal contact allows us to directly express our concern for some of the nation's most valued cultural resources, whether owned and managed by private individuals or by public agencies.

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*The Phipps Site  
NHL in northwest  
Iowa is best  
reached by fording  
a small stream.  
Photo by the  
author.*

